

The Risk by **EvieSmallwood**

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Genre: Angst, Character Study, Three of those 353 days, this is just me projecting

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Summary:

“Punch me in the face.”

“What?”

They’re standing in the middle of the cul-de-sac. It’s June. It’s hot—so hot the sun seems to slap them, just hard enough to be uncomfortable, to sustain that mild annoyance.

Lucas is squinting at him with bemusement. He asks again: “What?”

“Punch me.” Mike points to his jaw. “Right here.”

The Risk

Author's Note:

Rated M for heavy profanity.

I need to feel something. I need to feel something.

“Punch me in the face.”

“What?”

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Lucas is squinting at him with bemusement. He asks again: “What?”

“Punch me.” Mike points to his jaw. “Right here.”

“If this is about impressing some girl...” Lucas shakes his head, eyes rolling.

“What?! No. No—I just... just punch me, okay?”

“No! Not okay! You're being weird!”

“Oh, for fuck's sake, Lucas! Just do it!”

He doesn't expect his friend to follow through, but before he knows it, Mike is lying on the asphalt groaning. He cups his throbbing jawbone, knowing it's going to bruise, knowing his mom will immediately tack it on to yet another injury received at the hands of a bully, but a part of him buzzes. His stomach flips at the pain; he relishes in it. This is alive. This is breathing.

“Shit, Mike, are you okay?!”

Mike takes the offered hand, accepts being pulled up, and grins at Lucas. “Yeah. Thanks.” With that, he scoops up his backpack and runs the ten feet to his house, ignoring his friend's confused calls

after him.

Breathing. Beating.

It's July. It's fucking *boiling*.

They spend their days doing cannonballs off of the diving board at the public pool, splashing each other with water, and laughing too much. The laughter is easy. It's easy to feel in the moment, but the minute the happiness ebbs away—that's when the bad swoops in. It swallows him, if only for small moments; it eats him, it crushes him, and then it throws him back up.

On a Friday afternoon in Dustin's backyard, with his mom working a late shift, they camp out.

It's a mess; the tent is shoddily constructed, the marshmallows are burnt, and Mews tears up Mike's sleeping bag—but he doesn't care. It's better. This is better than being alone in his room, or the basement. This is one night off from the routine eleven-o'clock call.

They pass around a beer can Lucas swiped from the fridge in his dad's shed, which is dubbed his 'man cave'. It's not enough to really get any of them drunk, but they're a little buzzed and a lot giddy.

Dustin farts and Lucas starts giggling like a ten year old. Will's marshmallow gets so roasted it pops and they all crack up. Mike trips and falls into the tent, and it takes them ten minutes to sober up again.

It's good. The whole night feels vague, like he's floating through it; letting it happen to him rather than experiencing it. He's never really done this before—detached himself from himself. It feels both lonely and exhilarating.

The next morning, he wakes up in a huddle of teenage boy; surrounded by friends and the smell of burnt food and an early morning. Day 206 might not be horrible, but it won't be as good as day 205.

On day 300, he has a panic attack.

“Fuck you! Just fuck you! This is all *bullshit!*”

He can recall squirming against the vice like grip of his teacher, wanting nothing more than to break free, to hurt him, maybe kick him in the balls, but then he catches the wide eyed gazes of his best friends and deflates all in one go.

He lets himself be led through the halls, lets himself be chastised by teacher after teacher all until he's being suspended by the principal for three days and screamed at by his parents.

“I need air,” he says, not looking at them.

“Oh, you need air. Did you hear that, Karen? The boy needs—”

“Yes, I need *air*,” Mike snaps. He glares at his father from the plastic school chair. “There's this thing called oxygen? You breathe it?”

“Why you—”

His father is pointing a finger at Mike's face, his own scrunched up in anger. Karen grabs Ted's hand and lowers it. “Why don't you go to the bathroom, sweetie?”

Mike stands, while Ted glares at Karen with incredulity. “*Sweetie?*!”

He doesn't stay any longer, slipping through the doors and into the empty hallway, running until he reaches the boys' bathroom.

Mike ducks into the last stall and plops down on the toilet. He clutches his heart, eyes closed as the wave of anxiety rushes over him. *What did I do, what did I do, what did I do...*

He can't breathe. Mike jerks off his sweater and undoes the top few buttons of the shirt beneath. He balls up the woollen garment and hugs it to his chest like a teddy bear. That's when the tears start falling. *Why can't I just be a kid again, why do I have to be such a fucking monster, why am I so alone...*

He cries until he can't make any more tears, and when he's done, he

stands, wipes his eyes, and throws the soaked sweater back on.

That's when he spots the sharpie on the ground.

It's almost hidden behind a thin strip of toilet paper, but the end is poking out. Mike leans down and grabs it.

He considers his next action for a long moment, breathing heavily still. It only gets worse when he realises just how angry he is. Who gave that asshole the right to be such a dick to his students? Why is he even working here still? Why is Mike the one suspended when that fucker should be fired?!

And so he uncaps the pen and proceeds to write, in huge letters: *MR. KAWALSI IS A FUCKING HUGE DICK.*

He regrets it the moment it's on the wall. He even tries to rub at it with a wet paper towel, but it does nothing. And so he leaves it there, panting, and storms out of the bathroom. There's no one in sight. The side exit is just ten feet away.

Mind buzzing, Mike walks out of the school. He rounds the front to the bike racks and grabs his, mounts it, and is gone within seconds.

Like a ghost.

Like her.

It's day 323.

He's lying on his bed, face up, but his eyes are closed. It feels like he hasn't slept in weeks, but he's always dreaming. Dreaming his life.

This, though... this is real. It has to be.

The void is dark. There's nothing as far as the eye can see but the still, standing water. He sits there for a minute, uncertain. He isn't sure at first if what he's feeling and seeing is actually before him, but the cold of the water and the way it echoes when splashed doesn't come in sleep.

There's no one here. No El, no monster, no nothing. But somehow it's better than being in the real world.

He lies down and closes his eyes, thinking up a world. Mike finds himself slipping back into the one he does most often; the one where she never disappeared and they're all still together, playing D&D in the basement and working odd jobs to pay for arcade games. One where she fits so seamlessly into their reality.

When he dreams her, it's like she's real. It's like he's seeing her. She looks different, but his asleep mind can never quite process those differences. All he knows is that her hair is soft, that sometimes she's screaming and other times she's crying. He knows that she comes here, looking for him, calling out his name. He knows that he misses her. So much it makes his whole body numb except his heart, which burns.

It's day 323, and he's alive, but the possibility that she isn't tears him up inside.

Author's Note:

This is shorter than what I'm used to posting, and honestly I only wrote it because I needed to get some feelings out. It's very hastily thrown together, I apologise.